Knowing the Rules: Planning Considerations for NATO Operations

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OFFICERS OF THE U.S. Armed Forces have been familiar with the inner workings of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) since its inception in 1949. The first commander of NATO's military forces, General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower, was an American, as has been every Supreme Commander, Europe (SACEUR) since. When NATO employed several army groups throughout Europe, opportunities for Americans to serve in NATO billets, interact with NATO organizations, and gain understanding of NATO operations abounded. This is no longer the case. The United States' withdrawal of a sizable portion of its forces from Europe, the increase in the number of NATO nations, and the ongoing transformation of the Alliance provide fewer opportunities for U.S. officers to learn how NATO forces are structured, organized, and employed. Although the Army's current focus is on Afghanistan and Iraq, commanders and military planners should not lose sight of the requirement to understand NATO's operational capabilities and limitations.

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On 31 May 2005, the NATO-led International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) assumed responsibility for four western Afghan provinces, placing half of Afghanistan under ISAF control. As NATO and the U.S.-led Global Counterterrorism Force (GCTF) gain control of more of Afghanistan, it becomes even more critical for U.S. commanders to understand the capabilities and limitations of NATO's modus operandi. ISAF is NATO's first out-of-area operation; that is, outside of Europe—NATO's traditional area of interest—but it will surely not be its last.

The vision of a transformed NATO emphasizes a "command and force structure [that] must be expeditionary in character and design and . . . capable of conducting a higher number of smaller, concurrent operations at some distance from home bases as well as sustaining operations over long periods of time."[1] Therefore, considerations concerning command relationships, national caveats, logistics, force generation, national resources, and communications apply to future as well as ongoing operations. These realities are not likely to change.

NATO Command Relationships

NATO command relationships are far more restrictive than those of the U.S. Armed Forces. Other than standing headquarters that are a part of the NATO command structure, NATO does not possess any forces, save a limited aerial warning capability. From NATO's perspective, its forces are borrowed manpower. As a result, the authority a NATO commander can exercise over his forces is not nearly as broad as that of a U.S. commander.

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are familiar, significant differences exist between NATO and American definitions. The U.S. Department of Defense defines OPCON as "the authority to perform those functions of command over subordinate forces involving organizing and employing commands and forces, assigning tasks, designating objectives, and giving authoritative direction necessary to accomplish the mission."[2] The NATO definition is more restrictive, particularly with regard to task organization: "The authority delegated to a commander to direct forces assigned so that the commander might accomplish specific missions or tasks, which are usually limited by function, time, or location; to deploy units concerned; and to retain or assign tactical control of those units. *It does not include authority to assign separate employment of components of the units concerned"* (emphasis added).[3] NATO commanders in the field wield less authority over subordinate forces than their American counterparts.

Complicating matters is the NATO commander's inability to delegate OPCON to other commanders. Forces placed under NATO command are OPCON to the highest level of command, normally SACEUR. Depending on the national restrictions placed on those forces, SACEUR might or might not be authorized to delegate OPCON of those forces. In certain circumstances, a NATO theater commander might have OPCON of several units and yet be unable to task organize them or delegate his authority over them. Unity of command is virtually impossible to achieve, and when tactical communications are nonexistent, as is often the case, the result is a complex, often confusing command and control (C2) structure.

The relationships between a commander and his subordinate formations are critical, but even more important are the restrictions placed on that commander's employment of those formations. These restrictions are commonly known as national caveats. In the strictest sense, national caveats allow a nation to ensure that its forces are not employed in a manner for which they have not been trained or equipped. An explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) unit, for example, might be prohibited from conducting improvised explosive device defense (IEDD) operations because its soldiers have not been trained for that type of work. The caveat precludes a NATO commander from improperly employing the EOD team in an IEDD role, either through an act of omission or commission.

Caveats that prevent a commander from employing his forces even though they are trained and capable of performing the mission are even more harmful. These caveats range from restrictions regarding flights (to reduce costs) to deployment locations because the caveats have not been updated to reflect operational realities, the nation wishes to enable sustainment operations, or the area is less hazardous than others. Most insidious are hidden caveats that the nation did not disclose when it transferred its forces to NATO control. In most cases, either the Senior National Representative (SNR) or National Contingent Commander (NCC) holds what is known as a red card, meaning that even if there is not a specific caveat governing a set of circumstances, the SNR or NCC can still prevent his force from being employed based on his assessment of the situation.

Stating Caveats

In planning for the arrival and employment of new NATO forces, a pressing question is, Which caveats will they come with? Unfortunately, there is no way to know until the force is transferred to NATO's control. When a nation places its forces under NATO command, it issues a transfer of authority (TOA) message a few days before the scheduled TOA, stating which force requirements the units will fill, their command relationships to

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the gaining commander, and the limitations on their employment (caveats). Until the message arrives at the gaining headquarters, any discussion of caveats is speculation. Given this method of notification, we can understand the challenges NATO commanders face. To generate a force, NATO must develop a concept of employment to justify the force's requirements. That concept is based on the assumption that the forces required can accomplish their tasks, but this assumption remains an assumption until the actual TOA of the required forces. The TOA is the moment of truth because only at that moment will planners know if their concept of employment is feasible. Expecting a NATO planner to know with any certainty what a force can and cannot do until the actual TOA message arrives is unrealistic.[4]

Planning Logistics

Logistics planning for a NATO operation is equally complex, but in a different way. Whether in Korea or Europe, a U.S. officer will have heard this phrase at least one time: Logistics is a national responsibility. For operations that occur within a force's homeland, this imperative poses no significant challenge. The United States has a logistics infrastructure for the Korean peninsula that supplies its units there; the South Koreans draw their logistics from their own stocks. The same model existed for NATO when the organization was focused on defending central Europe. Nations defending their homelands drew sustenance from their own stocks; the United States built its own logistics infrastructure to supply its needs.

NATO's new expeditionary role, however, has had a significant second-order effect on the concept of national logistics. Because nations can no longer draw on their own pre-positioned stocks within their boundaries, they create their own logistics pipelines from Europe or North America to the theater of operations. This arrangement requires parallel supply structures and redundancy of effort. In some respects, this is to be expected because nations do not, for example, have many common Class IX (Repair Parts) requirements. However, the fiscal policy of "costs lie where they fall" means that nations will avoid consolidating requirements unless they can be certain they will recoup any expenses incurred. This policy translates into a significant change for the NATO combined-joint logistician (CJ4).

In the NATO context, the CJ4 is more of a coordinator to fulfill logistics needs than an actual operator. For example, NATO does not own any real estate within the Kabul area. The camps there were paid for by individual nations, not by any common funding. As a result, forces rotating into theater and who are seeking billets do not look to the CJ4 to provide accommodations. Instead, the CJ4 guides the national reconnaissance party to national camps so national teams can negotiate where the arriving forces will bed down and how much they will have to pay to do so. If a nation cannot, or chooses not to, establish its own logistics structure in theater, it might make good its shortfalls either through contracts or bilateral agreements with nations that already possess sufficient logistics capacity. In any case, logistics is a national issue. The gaining NATO headquarters coordinates the provision of logistics but does not provide it.

The effect of this logistics model on U.S. operations, particularly in Afghanistan, is significant. As U.S. forces pass to NATO command, one should not assume that NATO will provide those units' needs because NATO does not possess any logistics units. Any administrative or logistics support must come from the nation through national means or the establishment of bilateral agreements. Reflagging a U.S. unit, whether it is an infantry battalion, a helicopter company, or a provincial reconstruction team (PRT), means that a support structure must also exist because it is solely an American responsibility.

Force Generation

If NATO logistics is difficult for many U.S. officers to understand, how NATO generates forces is even more confusing. To generate the requirement for forces, a NATO command will develop a concept of operations based on the minimum military requirement (MMR) principle, the absolute minimum of forces required to accomplish the mission. This MMR is translated into a combined-joint statement of requirement (CJSOR), the NATO equivalent of a request for forces (RFF). The CJSOR lists, by line, units needed to conduct the operation and describes additional enablers required. When the developing headquarters approves the operations plan (OPLAN) and CSJOR, it forwards them to the next higher echelon, usually Supreme Headquarters, Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), for approval. Once

approved, the CJSOR is the basis for the force-generation process. Chaired by the Deputy SACEUR, a force-generation conference is supposed to be straightforward: the Deputy SACEUR requests forces for each line on the CJSOR, and each nation's National Military Representative (NMR), usually a general officer, responds with what his nation is willing to provide. Any gaps left in the CJSOR remain as shortfalls, to be filled at a later time or simply left unfilled. In many cases, however, the NMRs do not have the authority to offer forces, so they postpone doing so until they can consult with their respective governments, thus further delaying the process.

Unlike the American RFF process in which the Secretary of Defense approves or denies force requests, NATO's force-generation process is ongoing. In some instances, CJSOR shortfalls might affect the operation only slightly; in others, shortfalls might render the concept infeasible. Although all NATO operations require the political consent of the 26 permanent representatives to the North Atlantic Council (NAC), the force-generation conference demonstrates each member nation's true political will. This is an important distinction, because a NAC statement supporting a particular course of action is not equivalent to resourcing it. Worse, when operations become long-term investments, some nations cannot sustain their original contributions and create future gaps in the CJSOR, further reducing a force structure already based on the minimum force necessary to make the operation feasible.

Financial Support

Although the basis for force generation is single-nation contributions, at times this is a multinational concern, particularly when new NATO nations eager to provide forces to demonstrate their commitment to the Alliance are unable to sustain the forces they offer. When a nation offers an infantry battalion, but cannot logistically support it in the field, a NATO command echelon, usually SHAPE, brokers a deal between nations to provide that support. In some instances, the support takes the form of financial support; in others, it might be deployment of critical enablers such as tactical air control parties, EOD assets, or strategic lift. Few NATO nations can deploy forces strategically. Most either contract for the support or ask another nation to provide the needed lift.

As the strongest member of NATO and one that encourages other nations to contribute to NATO operations, the United States underwrites critical shortfalls. U.S. officers must remain aware of the constraints under which most European member nations operate, particularly those who are European Union (EU) members or member-aspirants. The EU prohibits member nations or potential member nations from deficit spending, so the United States cannot expect its allies to match its fiscal flexibility. In most respects, with regard to NATO's newer member nations, one must not confuse a lack of ability with a lack of willingness. Even so, speeding up ISAF expansion in Afghanistan might not necessarily be the best approach just now. The United States will most likely have to provide several critical enablers to convince nations to contribute forces to expand ISAF, and these critical enablers are the same forces many hope to free up by expanding ISAF.

Tactical Communications

The disparate capabilities of NATO nations create challenges that NATO's approach to tactical communications only exacerbates. As with logistics, tactical communications are a national responsibility. Because each of the 26 member nations has different communications requirements and procurement procedures, NATO does not possess a standard tactical communications network. NATO only provides communications to the echelon immediately below an established NATO headquarters. For example, the only current NATO-established headquarters is ISAF Headquarters in Kabul. NATO provides communications only to the Kabul Multinational Brigade and the PRTs. Battle groups or mobile observation teams are not eligible for NATO communications equipment. Other forces that arrive as reinforcements (an infantry battalion from Europe, for example) must be collocated with existing C2 nodes because NATO will not provide them with communications assets. While this procedure is

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fiscally responsible from NATO's perspective, its effect cannot be understated.

Keeping in mind that all forces begin under the senior NATO theater commander's operational control, one can readily see that the absence of tactical communications poses significant challenges. Although commanders can mitigate some risks by establishing command relationships at lower echelons, the requirement for units to deploy with a significant liaison capability remains. If the NATO commander cannot delegate command authority, the need for liaison officers (LNOs) equipped with adequate communications is only more pronounced. Further complicating matters is that outside agencies require NATO headquarters to provide LNOs with secure means of communication. Because NATO possesses little, if any, tactical communications equipment, it is virtually impossible to support such a requirement.

Turning to nations to provide personnel and assets might work in some respects, but providing multiple LNOs with no common secure communications equipment does not address the core problem. U.S. planners must keep in mind that NATO cannot replicate a U.S.-designed communications framework because the resources and interoperability simply do not exist.

Understanding NATO

For U.S. officers, raised in a culture of unity of command and common-user logistics, wrestling with the challenges outlined here is frustrating, to say the least. After a briefing was given to U.S. Army colonels and brigadier generals, a single question arose: So what's the good news? The response was to the point: "Within a couple weeks, half of Afghanistan will be under ISAF control. Within the next year or so, we anticipate even more of Afghanistan to be under ISAF's control. That's pretty good news to me."

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At this point, the importance of understanding how NATO approaches and designs operations should be clear. As NATO continues its transformation to an expeditionary alliance, some of these issues will resolve themselves, particularly logistics and communications. Other issues, such as command relationships and the imbalance of national resources, will most likely remain for as long as an alliance exists. In any case, U.S. officers, especially those who conduct operations alongside NATO forces, must understand the constraints and limitations in NATO operations. Not doing so could catastrophically affect U.S. forces if they are placed under NATO command without adequate support. ***MR***

NOTES

1. Edmund P. Giambastiani, Supreme Allied Commander, Operations, and James L. Jones, Supreme Allied Commander, Transformation, *Strategic Vision: The Military Challenge* (Mons, France, and Norfolk, VA: NATO Publication, 2004), 6.

2. Joint Publication 1-02, *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 12 April 2001, as amended through 31 August 2005), 385.

3. NATO, Allied Administrative Publication 6, *NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions* (Brussels: NATO Publication, 2003), 2-O-2.

4. Further complications to future planning occur when nations introduce forces into theater, fail to produce transfer of authority messages, and then at some point give notice that their forces are soon to redeploy, thereby requiring other forces to replace them.

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